DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 302 378 RC 016 919

AUTHOR Lingren, Herbert G.; And Others
TITLE Rural Mid-Life Single Adult Families: Male/Female Similarities and Differences.
PUB DATE 3 Nov 87
NOTE 20p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Coping; Interpersonal Relationship; Leisure Time; *Life Satisfaction; Life Style; Low Income; *Middle Aged Adults; *Quality of Life; *Rural Population; Self Esteem; *Sex Differences; Social Isolation; Surveys

ABSTRACT

The study examined data from rural midlife singles concerning: (1) their socio-demographic characteristics; (2) their life satisfactions and happiness with their rural lifestyle; (3) their self-image and self-esteem; (4) their coping strategies; and (5) their social support systems. Subjects were 76 men and 149 women between the ages of 35 and 59 who live on farms, ranches, or in communities of less than 2,000. Participants responded to a ten-page questionnaire measuring several demographic and personal-social variables. The researchers conducted a one-way analysis of variance by sex for the variables studied. Results suggested that although health did not seem to be a problem for most rural midlife singles, low income--especially for females--probably inhibited greater participation in social events and travel to larger cities for recreation. While most reported being quite happy with their station in life, there was an undercurrent of isolation and a lack of opportunity for singles living in some parts of rural America. The report gives implications for researchers and service providers. This report contains 32 references and 2 tables. (KS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED302378

Rural Mid-Life Single Adult Families: Male/Female Similarities and Differences

by: Dr. Herbert G. Lingren, Dr. Lee Kimmans, Ms. Sally Van Zandt

Date: November 3, 1987

This benchmark study was designed to gather information on rural midlife singles when little or no research was available. The study examined socio-demographic characteristics, life satisfaction and well-being.

Although health did not seem to be a problem for most rural midlife singles; low income, especially for females, probably inhibited greater participation in social events and travel to larger cities for recreation. While most report being quite happy with their station in life, there is an undercurrent of isolation and a lack of opportunity for singles living in some parts of rural America.

RC016919

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Herbert G. Lingren
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

RURAL MIDLIFE SINGLE ADULT FAMILIES: MALE AND FEMALE DIFFERENCES

Until recently, there has been little research on the lifestyles and well-being of adult singles (Barkas, 1980; Simenauer & Carroll, 1982). Less attention has been paid to single men and women approaching the life stage referred to as the middle years, and no research has focused exclusively on the rural, midlife single individual. Past research reported to date have focused primarily upon the young, single, urban adult (Stein, 1976), or, the needs of the unmarried in the later stages of life (Keith, 1986, Ward, 1981). With attractive career opportunities, high divorce rates, the acceptance of cohabitation, and the unbalanced sex ratios of middle and later adulthood, the unmarried are one of the most rapidly growing populations in society.

Smith (1983) reported that by age 35, women begin to outnumber men by an increasing margin, and that in the 40-44 age group, single women outnumber single men by almost 3 to 1 (U.S. Census, 1982). Stein (1976) observed that the greatest need expressed by single adults is for networks of social relationships that can facilitate sharing, intimacy, and continuity. It is reasonable to assume that the unmarried in rural areas may have an even more difficult time establishing and maintaining supportive social relationships. This may be due to

low numbers, lack of opportunities for getting together, and the isolation of singles in a predominately married, rural society.

Research about Single Adults

At a conference on single lifestyles, Smith (1983) reviewed and summarized much of the research pertaining to singles and health (Gove, 1972; Spreitzer & Riley, 1974), friendships (Block, 1980), loneliness (Cargan, 1981), and society's negative attitudes regarding the unmarried.

Simenauer & Carroll (1982) claimed to have studied a representative sample of 3,000 men and women in 57 major cities and 275 metropolitan areas, who ranged in age from twenty to fifty-five. But there is no information about which separates young adults from middle year adults. Barkas (1980) presented results of her in-depth interviews with two hundred singles living in small cities across the nation. Her report reveals little about "being single" during the middle years, and nothing concerning what it is like to be a single adult in a rural setting. Keith (1986) identified some likely precursors of the isolation of the unmarried in later life, but does not give any information on patterns of midlife adjustment. Keith and Nauta (1988) examined social activity patterns of the unmarried in both the city and country, but only for persons aged 58-63.

Personal and Social Characteristics in Midlife

Some theorists believe that the need for social companionship is developed in childhood and maintained throughout life. Although some people thrive in large social networks,

others are more comfortable in near isolation (Lowenthal, 1964). Weiss and Lowenthal (1975) reported that the middle aged persons in their San Francisco study were involved in more understanding and helping relationships than those persons younger or older than themselves. Women utilized reciprocity in relationships more than men. According to Kimmons et al. (1987), rural midlife women scored significantly higher than men on acquiring social support as a way of coping with their rural lifestyle.

Stueve and Fischer (1978) described friendship networks by age and sex. In their urban sample, middle aged men (ages 36-50) had more friends and more coworkers. Women had more kin associations but the size of the total social network was about the same for both. The major differences were in the sources of their relationships. One can assume that persons who lived in rural areas might have fewer networking possibilities than their urban counterparts.

In Veroff, Douvan and Kukla's studies (1981) of mental health and happiness, the percent of middle-aged who were "very happy" was about the same as younger men. However, the younger women said they were happier than those in middle age.

Lowenthal, et al. (1975) found inconsistant patterns of self-esteem in middle-aged men whereas self-esteem in women seemed to improve with age. Women tended to derive feelings of self-worth from circumstances related to the family while men derived their self-esteem from job satisfaction. Middle age for women, meant children growing up and parents growing older. For

men, it meant taking stock of career aspirations. While women spoke of freedoms, men reported either job pressures or job boredom (Neugarten, 1968). Kimmons, et al. (1987) utilized McCubbin's F-COPES to learn about the coping strategies of rural midlife singles. They found that women scored higher than men on seeking spiritual support and utilized significantly more coping strategies.

Purpose of Study

With little existing research related to unmarried persons in the middle years of life and the paucity of existing data on the lifestyles of single adults living in rural areas, this study was primarily descriptive and exploratory in nature. Specifically, the study examined data from rural midlife singles concerning: (1) their socio-demographic characteristics; (2) their life satisfactions and happiness with their rural lifestyle; (3) their self-image and self-esteem; (4) their coping strategies; and (5) their social support systems.

Methodology

Procedure

A ten-page questionnaire was constructed measuring several demographic and personal-social variables. A cover letter explaining the importance and purpose of the research was attached to the questionnaire and sent to a stratified sample of 1,000 adults identified as rural, midlife singles who lived in selected counties. Rural midlife singles were defined as currently unmarried; between the ages of 35 and 59; living on

farms or ranches; or living in communities of less than 2,000 population. Usable questionnaires were returned by 225 respondents (76 men and 149 women). The somewhat low usable response rate (23%) was due in part to incorrect addresses; respondents being under age 35 or over age 59; incomplete data; and budget constraints that did not permit follow-up. However, it should be noted that the respondents represented every rural region in the state, and the numbers of questionnaires received from sampled counties roughly approximated the rural population of those counties.

Variables

Demographic variables measured were: age, sex, single status (i.e., never married, widowed, divorced, separated), current living situation, occupation, education, and income.

Respondents were asked about the personal and social characteristics of their living conditions. These variables included: health, happiness, friends, social activity, loneliness, church attendance, and self-esteem.

Data analysis

Following is a report of male/female cross-tabulations using frequency distributions in presenting a demographic and personal/social profile of the respondents. A one-way analysis of variance, by sex, is calculated for the variables previously listed.

Findings

Demographic profile

The demographic profile of the 225 males and females who returned usable questionnaires; who were currently single; midlife (between 35 and 59 years of age; and living on farms/ranches or in communities of under 2,000 population) are described below.

Single status. Half of the males in the sample were never married compared with only 5 percent of the women. Thirty-two percent of the males were divorced compared with 42 percent of the females. Forty-eight percent of the women were widowed as compared to only 14 percent of the men. A very small percentage of the men or women were either cohabitating or separated.

Living arrangements. Nearly half of the men (49%) and most (89%) of the women had children. Twenty-eight percent of the men and 48 percent of the women were single parents (i.e. living in a family as its head). More than half of the men (58%) and nearly half (44%) of the women lived alone.

Residence. Nearly two-thirds of the males (62%) lived on a farm or ranch, while 40 percent of the females lived in towns of less than 1,000 population. Almost one-third (31%) of the females lived in communities between 1,000 and 2,000 population. Overall, most men living on a farm or ranch were alone, whereas the women were more likely to live in a small town, most often as a single parent.

Occupation. Half of the midlife single male respondents, but only 12 percent of the females, were farmers or ranchers. Approximately one-third (33%) of the women and 31 percent of the men were in professional managerial positions (i.e. teachers, attorneys, clergy, physicians, small business managers, etc.). Another one-fourth (26%) of the women, but only 2% of the men were clerical workers (sales persons, clerical assistants, mail carriers, etc.). Fifteen percent of the women and 13% of the men were skilled or semi skilled workers. Eighteen percent of the men and 21 percent of the women indicated they were currently unemployed.

Education. Twice as many men (37%) as women (17%) were college graduates. The most common level of education for women in the study was "some college or trade school" (40%) while the most common levels of education for men were high school graduate (34%) or college graduate (37%). Thirty-four percent of both men and women finished this education at the higher school level.

Income. More than two-thirds of the women and half the men had incomes of less than $20,000 per year, and about 8 percent of both men and women had incomes of less than $5,000 per year. Forty-three percent of the men and 25 percent of the women had incomes above $20,000 per year. Males reported having significantly greater annual incomes than females $p < .01$).

Personal/Social Variables

Descriptive data on several personal/social variables (health, happiness, friends, social activity, loneliness, church attendance, self-esteem), are presented in Table 1.

(Place Table 1 about here)

Significant differences between rural, midlife, single men and women were found on the following variables:

Friendships. Females indicated to a significantly greater extent than males that they had "friends that understand me" ($X = 3.10$ vs. $X = 2.80$; $p < .05$).

Social activity. Males reported a greater frequency of social activity than females ($X = 2.47$ vs. $X = 2.11$; $p < .05$).

Church attendance. Females indicated more frequent church attendance than males ($X = 4.83$ vs. $X = 4.32$; $p < .01$).

There were no significant differences between males and females on health, happiness, loneliness or self-esteem measures.

Places and social events frequented.

Table 2 presents data concerning places and social events most frequently selected by the respondents when going out socially. They were asked to make a first, second and third choice. Their first choice place/event is presented in Table 2.

(Place Table 2 about here)

The most frequented place for both males and females is restaurant or cafe (35% vs. 32% respectively). Males are more likely to frequent bar or nightclub (22% vs. 9%); athletic event (16% vs. 9%); and movie (9% vs. 3%). They are less likely than females to attend church events (8% vs 20%); and to visit relatives (5% vs. 14 %). They both visit friends with the same frequency (16% vs 15%).

Discussion

The findings in this study of rural, midlife singles generally concur with findings of previous research on single adults. Simenauer & Carroll (1982) found that 64 percent of the men between the ages of 35 and 55 lived alone, whereas in this sample, 58 percent of the aged 35 to 59 respondents lived alone Likewise, Simenauer & Carroll (1982) indicated that 39 percent of the women in their study lived alone compared with 44 percent of the aged 35 to 59 respondents in the present study.

When reviewing literature on marital status and health, Somers (1981) concluded that with a growing proportion of widowed, divorced and separated persons in the population, there would be an increasing demand for health care services. This rural midlife sample appears to be in relatively good health. Nc significant health differences were found between men and women.

Loneliness is often reported as a major disadvantage of being single (Simenauer & Carroll (1982). Other disadvantages include fear, due to living alone, economic insecurity, social stigma, and the "dating grind". Cargan (1981) reported that

although the stereotype of singles being more lonely than married persons is "mostly true," the loneliness stereotype is not a general feeling for all singles, or for most singles. When asked to report their loneliness, respondents were somewhere in the middle. Some were lonely and some were not. As would be expected some are more lonely than others, although no significant difference was found between males and females on this measure.

Rural midlife males did earn significantly more money than females, although they were not significantly more highly educated (except more men were college graduates). Most of the women lived in small communities where pay is universally low, while many of the men were engaged in farming or ranching (where gross income is usually higher). Most income data indicate that women, regardless of their social status, earn less than men.

Men seem to have significantly fewer friends that understand them than do women. They may go out more often, to a movie, restaurant or bar, but this may well be an activity they do by themselves. Women's church involvement may be instrumental in their close social relationships. Block (1980), Tognoli (1980), and Balswich & Peek (1971) have maintained that traditional sex role expectations hinder men in the making and maintenance of close relationships. Traditionally, men have had greater freedom (and greater availability of transportation) to engage in various activities and the data is this study supports this belief. Most of the single women in this study have been married, and have

custody of their children while half of the men had never married.

Respondent Comments

In response to an open-ended question about being single, being in the midlife category, and living in rural areas of the state, the following are typical of the comments they made:

"At times I wonder if there are any single, opposite sex people my age less than a tank of gas away."

"I enjoy being single at this point in time. Men treat me as equal as well."

"The hardest part in being a woman is getting the heavy work done. Also, meeting men and finding a babysitter so you can go out."

"I think it is more difficult in the country than it would be in a big city. Here, everyone knows your business and looks down on you if you're divorced."

"There isn't much to do if you don't go and sit in a bar all night."

"Being single here, you are around people who care and you can feel you belong to a community and church."

Implications for Researchers

Although the current study is exploratory and descriptive, efforts to obtain data from a large, national, stratified random sample is needed. A U.S. Census Bureau report (1983) largely ignores the various categories of the unmarried (i.e., never-married, divorced, separated, widowed), and especially of those

in the middle years. When researchers write about the "rural lifestyle", they usually refer to a married, rural lifestyle, and not to a rural, midlife single lifestyle.

Much work is needed in the development of a theoretical framework relevant to the adult lives of the unmarried. As Etzkowitz & Stein (1978) and Stein (1981) have pointed out, there is no developmental or conceptual framework in family science that is appropriate for singles. Stein (1976, 1981) has specifically attempted to conceptualize singlehood in terms of a typology: a lifespan perspective and the "pushes" and "pulls" of both marriage and singlehood.

Implications for Service Providers

The data in this survey indicate contradictory conclusions about the life satisfaction and well-being of midlife, rural singles. Although health did not seem to be a problem for most; low income, especially for females, probably inhibited greater participation in social events and travel to larger cities for recreation. While most report being quite happy with their station in life, there is an undercurrent of isolation and a lack of opportunity for singles.

Successful programs for singles (Fisher, 1982); and for rural, small town singles have been reported by Hawkins & Greene (1984) and Kimmons (1981). Gaige (1984) reported a huge, unexpected response to a questionnaire for singles in a national farm publication. An overwhelming number of letters and inquiries from across the country asked how rural singles could

meet a potential mate. Gaige (1095) reported that it was like "pulling the fabled finger from a hole in the dike." The first national convention of Singles in Agriculture, held near a centrally located midwestern city, drew more then 150 single persons (Associated Press, 1987). Numerous calls were made to local extension offices to obtain information about the conference and plans for a new one.

Van Zandt and Gallup (1979) recommended that single parents in midlife needed well developed support systems. Being single is a part of the growth process. They need appreciation of their strengths, rather than focusing on the negative aspects of single parenthood.

An ever-increasing number of single persons actually live in rural areas and educational programs and social activities should be planned to meet their needs. Twenty-eight percent of the men and 48 percent of the women in this study indicated they were single parents, i.e., living in a family as head of household. Could not one assume that the needs of these families are as great as the needs of single parents living in urban areas? The respondents' personal comments reveal a desire for support, social activities and an opportunity to meet other singles as they struggle with isolation, limited opportunities and limited income. Local churches, education and service providers need to work with single persons in rural areas to develop opportunities that will serve their needs.

REFERENCES

Associated Press
1987. National meet brings together single farmers. Lincoln Journal-Star (February 22).

Balswick, J. & Peek, C.
1971. The inexpressive male: A tragedy of American society. The Family Coordinator, 20, 363-368.

Barkas, J. L.
1980. Single in America. New York: Athenueum.

Block, J.
1980. Friendship: How to give it and how to get it. New York: Macmillan.

Cargan, L.
1981. Singles: An examination of two sterotypes. Family Relations, 30, 377-385.

Etzkowitz, H. & Stein, P.
1978. The life spiral: Human needs and adults roles. Alternative Lifestyles, 1, 434-446.

Fisher, C.
1982. Community based family life education: The Family Life Council of Greater Greensboro, Inc. Family Relations, 31, 179-183.

Gaige, M.
1984. Finding a mate got you buffaloed? Farm Journal, 108 (August), 46-47.

Gaige, M.
1985. Single farm people shout, "Here I am." Farm Journal, 109 (Mid-January), 24-25.

Gove, W.
1972. The relationship between sex roles, marital status and mental illness. Social Forces, 51, 34-44.

Hawkins, L. & Greene, C.
1984. "An Extension Newsletter for Single Adults in North Carolina." Middle Years Focus Group Symposium. NCFR Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA.

Keith, P.
1986. Isolation of the unmarried in later life. Family Relations, 35, 389-395.

Keith, P. M. & Nauta, A.
1988. Old and single in the city and in the country: Activities of the unmarried. Family Relations, 37(1), 79-83.

Kimmons, L.
1981. "Programming for Rural and Small Town Single Adults." Roundtable. NCFR Annual Meeting, Milwaukee, WI.

Kimmons, L., Van Zandt, S., & Lingren, H.
1987. Coping strategies and the support networks of rural midlife single adults. In Lingren, H., et al (Eds.), Building Family Strengths: Pathways to Well-Being (Vol.8/9), pp. 333-347. Lincoln, NE: UN-L.

Lowenthal, M.
1964. Lives in Distress. New York: Basic Books.

Lowenthal, M. F., Thurnker, M. T., & Chiniboga, D.
1975. Four Stages of Life. San Francisco: Jossey-Boss.

Neugarten, B.
1968. The awareness of middleage. In Neugarten, B. (Ed.), Middle Age and Aging. Chicago: University Press.

Simenauer, J. & Carroll, D.
1982. Singles: The New Americans. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Smith, I.
1983. Demographic, social, and personal dimensions of singleness. Family Perspecitves, Winter, 3-18.

Somers, A.
1981. Marital status, health, and the use of health services: An old relationship revisited. In Stein, P. (Ed.) Single Life: Unmarried Adults in Social Context (pp. 178-190). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Spreitzer, E. & Riley, L.
1974. Factors associated with singlehood. Journal of Marriage and Family, 36, 533-542.

Stein, P.
1976. Single. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Stein, P.
1981. Single Life: Unmarried Adults in Social Context. New York: Martin's Press.

Stueve, A. & Fischer, C.
1978. Social networks and older woman. Paper presented at the Workshop on Older Women, Washington, D.C.

Tognoli, J.
1980. Male friendship and intimacy across the life span. Family Relations, 29, 273-279.

U.S. Bureau of the Census
July 1983. 1980 Census of the Population: General, social, and economic characteristics. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce.

U.S. Bureau of the Census
1982. Household and family characteristics, March 1981. Series P-20, No. 371. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office

Van Zandt, S. & Gallup, G.
1979. The single parent at midlife. Family Perspective, 13(2), 101-107.

Veroff, J., Douvan, E., & Kukla, R. A.
1981. The Inner American: A self-portrait from 1957 to 1976. New York: Basic Books.

Ward, P.
1981. The never-married in later life. In Stein, P. (Ed.) Single Life: Unmarried Adults in Social Context (pp. 342-356). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Weiss, L. & Lowenthal, M.
1975. Life course perspectives on friendship. In M. Lowenthal, M. Thurnker, & D. Chiniboga (Eds.) Four Stages of Life. San Francisco: Jossey Boss.

Table 1

One-way Analysis of Variance by Sex for Selected Demographic & Personal-Social Variables.

Variable		X	df	F
Income	Male	3.44	1	8.65*
	Female	2.94		
Happiness	Male	3.85	1	0.77 n.s.
	Female	3.74		
Friends	Male	2.80	1	5.00*
	Female	3.10		
Social Activity	Male	2.47	1	4.17*
	Female	2.11		
Loneliness	Male	3.65	1	0.12 n.s.
	Female	3.59		
Church Attendance	Male	4.32	1	5.92**
	Female	4.83		
Self-Esteem	Male	3.71	1	1.30 n.s.
	Female	3.85		

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 2

Places frequented when going out socially by number of respondents' first choice in order of sample preference.

Place	Male		Female		Total	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
Restaurant or cafe	27	(35%)	48	(32%)	75	(33%)
Church events	6	(8%)	30	(20%)	36	(16%)
Visit friends	12	(16%)	22	(15%)	34	(15%)
Bar or nightclub	17	(22%)	14	(9%)	31	(14%)
Athletic events	12	(16%)	13	(9%)	25	(11%)
Visit relatives	4	(5%)	21	(14%)	25	(11%)
Dancing (any type)	4	(5%)	14	(9%)	18	(8%)
Outdoor activities	7	(9%)	11	(7.4%)	18	(8%)
School events	4	(5%)	11	(7.4%)	15	(7%)
Movie	7	(9%)	4	(2.7%)	11	(5%)
Picnics and potlucks	2	(2.6%)	9	(6%)	11	(5%)
Social club	3	(3.9%)	8	(5.4%)	11	(5%)
Other	5	(6.6%)	5	(3.3%)	10	(4%)
Parties	3	(3.9%)	3	(2%)	6	(3%)
Play cards with friends	1	(1.3%)	4	(2.7%)	5	(5%)